Religious policies of Constantine I

The **religious policies of Constantine I** concerned the increasing toleration of Christianity, as well as stricter regulations against practices of Roman polytheism. This marked a decided shift from the religious policies of his predecessors, who did not tolerate Christianity. His initial proclamations included prohibitions on the construction of new temples,[1] while still tolerating Pagan sacrifices.[2] Later in his reign, he gave orders for the pillaging and the tearing down of pagan temples.[3][4][5]

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Conversion to Christianity

According to Church historians writing after his death, Constantine converted to Christianity and was baptised on his deathbed, thus making him the first Christian emperor. There are no known contemporary documents that attest to an earlier intention to become a member of the Church.[6][7] Constantine was baptized by Eusebius of Nicomedia, bishop of the city where he lay dying.[8]

Ban on new temples, toleration of sacrifices

Constantine, though he made his allegiance clear, did not outlaw paganism; in the words of an early edict, he decreed that polytheists could "celebrate the rites of an outmoded illusion," so long as they did not force Christians to join them.[9][10] In a letter to the King of Persia, Constantine wrote how he shunned the "abominable blood and hateful odors" of pagan sacrifices, and instead worshiped the High God "on bended knee",[2][11] and in the new capital city he built, Constantine made sure that there were no pagan temples built.[1] Constantine would sporadically prohibit public sacrifice and close pagan temples; very little pressure, however, was put on individual pagans, and there were no pagan martyrs.[9]

Constantine dedicated Constantinople with two Neoplatonists and friends Sopater and Praetextus present at its dedication. A year and a half later after dedicating the City of Constantinople, on Monday 11 May 330, when the festival of Saint Mocius was celebrated, the city was finally dedicated. The goddess Tyche was invited to come and live in the city, and her statue was placed in the hand of the statue of the emperor that was on top of the Column of Constantine, on the Forum with the same name. Although by now Constantine openly supported Christianity the city still offered room to pagan cults: there were shrines for the Dioscuri and Tyche. The Acropolis, with its ancient pagan temples, was left as it was. As for worshipping the emperor, Constantine's mausoleum gave him a Christ-like status: his tomb was set amid 12 monuments, each containing relics of one of the Apostles. Constantine had continued to engage in pagan rituals. The emperor still claimed to be a supernatural being, although the outward form of this personality cult had become Christian.[12]

According to some authors, the issuing of the Edict of Milan,[13] showed that Constantine continued the policy of toleration that Galerius had established. He "continued to pay his public honors to the Sun", until 325, on coins that showed him jointly with *Sol Invictus*, whereas his later coins showed the Chi-Rho sign.[14] In that year he had the Christian Bishops convene at the First Council of Nicaea, and from then on continued to take an active interest in the affairs of the Church.

Many historians, including MacMullen, have seen the seeds of future persecution by the state in Constantine's more belligerent utterances regarding the old religion.[3] Other historians emphasize that *de facto* paganism "was tolerated in the period from Constantine to Gratian. Emperors were tolerant in deed, if not always in word."[15]

Early coin of Constantine commemorating the pagan cult of *Sol Invictus*

Church restrictions opposing the pillaging of pagan temples by Christians were in place even while the Christians were being persecuted by the pagans. Spanish bishops in AD 305 decreed that anyone who broke idols and was killed while doing so was not formally to be counted as a martyr, as the provocation was too blatant.[16]

Constantine became the first Emperor in the Christian era to persecute specific groups of Christians, the Donatists, in order to enforce religious unity.[17]

Eusebius outlines various edicts in which Constantine expressed his lack of support and at time disgust for act of sacrifice and idol worship. Eusebius tells us that while Constantine disposed their "shires of falsehood", Constantine did not attempt to bring down any of the shrines or idols that populated various cities, including his new capital Constantinople. The historian T.D. Barnes makes multiple references to Eusebius's work with by which Barnes attests that Constantine was heavily in favor of the banning of pagan worship. Instead of taking down pagan worship sites, Constantine chose to instead ban the erecting of more sites as well as expanding and funding the creation of more churches. Lastly, in the text of Codex of Theodosianus, Constantine outright bans the "madness of sacrifice." Sacrifice was the cornerstone of the pagan religion and was necessary for worship. In this letter it is not clear whether it was issued by Constantine before or after his death, but it is addressed to his praetorian prefect. The problem with this interpretation of a more religiously zealous Constantine is the issue of his reign. Although Constantine is regarded as the first Christian emperor, this does not mean that there are no longer any pagans in the empire. However that does not mean that Christians held a numerical advantage or a sufficient powerbase on which to draw on to begin a systematic persecution of pagans. In addition there are various accounts that Constantine was still somewhat tolerant of the pagans. His earlier edict, the Edict of Milan, was changed to the Edict of the Provincials. The historian H. A. Drake points out that this edict, which called for peace and tolerance: "Let no one disturb another, let each man hold fast to that which his soil wishes…" Constantine never reversed this edict and Drake even goes as far as to believe Constantine may have been trying to create a society where to two religions merged peacefully. Regardless there is also evidence that Constantine did in fact erect several pagan worship sites. With the pagan historian Zosimus, we see that Constantine erected several statues of Apollo as well as other pagan gods. While it is clear that Constantine removed many pagans from office and replaced them with Christians as well as removing the requirement of sacrifice for imperial officers, Constantine seemed to only care about spreading his religion, not abolishing all others.

Legislation against magic and private divination

Constantine legislated against magic and private divination. A pagan writer alleges that this was driven by a fear that others might gain power through those means, as he himself had achieved power through the sound advice of Pagan soothsayers, convincing him of the perspicacity of Pagan prophecy.[18] His public attitude to pagan divination is indicated by legislation calling for the consultation of augurs after an amphitheater had been struck by lightning in the year 320.[19] Constantine explicitly allowed public divination as well as public Pagan practices to continue.[20] Constantine also issued laws confirming the rights of flamens, priests and duumvirs.[21] In 321 he legislated that the *venerable day of the sun* should be a day of rest for all citizens. In the year 323, he issued a decree banning Christians from participating in state sacrifices[22]

Pillaging and destruction of temples

During the course of his life he progressively became more Christian and turned away from the syncretic tendencies he appeared to favour at times, thereby demonstrating, according to the modern Catholic Encyclopedia, that "The God of the Christians was indeed a jealous God who tolerated no other gods beside him. The Church could never acknowledge that she stood on the same plane with

other religious bodies, she conquered for herself one domain after another".[23]

Even if Constantine had desired to Christianize the state, expediency dictated otherwise since Christians may have formed only a fifth part of the population in the West and a half of the population in the East.[4][24]

Constantine had a complex attitude towards morality; both his son and wife were executed at his instigation (the consensus view of ancient sources), he destroyed the Temple of Aphrodite in the Lebanon,[25] and ordered the execution of eunuch priests in Egypt[3] because they transgressed his moral norms. According to the historian Ramsay MacMullen Constantine desired to obliterate non-Christians but lacking the means he had to be content with robbing their temples towards the end of his reign.[26] He resorted to derogatory and contemptuous comments relating to the old religion; writing of the "true obstinacy" of the pagans, of their "misguided rites and ceremonial", and of their "temples of lying" contrasted with "the splendours of the home of truth".[4]

The first episodes of persecution of Paganism in the Christian history of the Roman Empire started late in Constantine's reign, with his orders for the pillaging and the tearing down of pagan temples.[3][4][5]

See also

- Serpent Column

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